



*Citation for published version:*

Sanchez, HS 2009, 'Building up literary reading responses in foreign language classrooms', *English Language Teacher Education and Development*, vol. 12, pp. 01-13.

*Publication date:*  
2009

[Link to publication](#)

**University of Bath**

**Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **BUILDING UP LITERARY READING RESPONSES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS**

*Hugo Santiago Sanchez*

### **Introduction**

In the last decades there has been a growing interest in integrating literature into the foreign language curriculum. At first glance, one expects this tendency to respond to the deep fascination that human beings have for centuries felt with storytelling and, therefore, to serve some motivational and humanistic purposes. However, this integration has been seen as serving merely linguistic purposes by most language educators, who regard literary texts simply as wonderful sources of input which expose students to a rich variety of language forms and uses as well as discourse types in motivating and meaningful contexts. Additionally, work on fictional texts is justified as long as it facilitates the development of reading comprehension skills and critical thinking techniques for text analysis.

Though these pedagogical goals are perfectly valid, the treatment of literary texts cannot be restricted to the attainment of language learning objectives. Foreign language teachers should not forget the educational implications of all the decisions they make in the classroom. Therefore, if they transmit the idea to learners that reading literary texts should be justified by some instrumental motivation such as vocabulary learning or text analysis, they are validating current teaching practices at schools which disregard the aesthetic goals for reading literature and, instead, emphasise the achievement of more objective goals that have nothing to do with the true nature of literary reading. These teaching practices usually lead to the same unfortunate outcomes: the widespread dislike for literary reading, the failure to associate the reading of fiction with pleasure, and the subsequent lack of literary reading habits. The purpose of the study reported in this article was, in broad terms, to explore the value of an alternative role of literary reading in foreign language classrooms. It specifically aimed at empowering students to develop a better appreciation of the literary experience and to read literature with greater competence and pleasure by encouraging them to adopt a reader-based approach to fictional texts and a predominantly aesthetic stance during the reader-text transaction.

### **Statement of purpose and focus of the study**

This study stemmed from the necessity to address some recurrent problems that EFL teacher

trainees in my teaching context manifested every year in relation to their attitude towards and treatment of literary texts. First, the learners appeared not to appreciate the importance of the literary experience in their lives. In questionnaires they completed at the beginning of the academic year, they claimed to read fiction for pleasure only occasionally and to favour the reading of non-fictional texts over fictional ones. They did not find the reading of fiction worth the effort and preferred to spend the time they devoted to reading on the acquisition of contents they would need academically or socially. They saw the literary experience as equivalent to a long reading comprehension exercise and usually undertook the task with some instrumental motivation in mind, for instance, to pass an examination or, in the best of cases, to be exposed to a large variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures in the target language. Second, and possibly as a result of their negative attitude towards the reading of fiction, they evidenced some problems in the treatment of literary texts. Their reading responses were characterised by a high level of superficiality and by the lack of 'uniqueness'. They thought that their ultimate goal when reading fiction for a class was to make the 'correct' interpretation of texts and to be able to answer the questions set by the teacher. When encouraged to provide a more critical analysis of a fictional text, they simply responded by supplying detailed but superficial information about the characters, plot, and setting. They rarely did any extensive reading, except if they perceived this might please the teacher. In the case of the few students who did provide a personal response and interpretation of a text, they found it difficult to justify and defend their answers, and, if challenged, they evidenced lack of self-confidence and quickly modified their ideas to fit those of the teacher. As a result, they found the reading experience relatively frustrating, boring, impersonal, and complicated.

The study reported here was based on the premise that these teacher trainees could improve their literary reading competence and attitude towards the literary experience if they were exposed to a learner-centred methodology which recognised and respected individual differences in responses, valued each student's contributions, and helped them to construct their reading responses taking into account their previous

experience, beliefs, values, and individual cognitive development. This meant that the focus was on the learner, who was responsible for constructing and shaping his/her own reading responses and interpretations of texts and eventually making them authoritative.

A theory of reading that was in accordance with these principles was the reader response theory which, broadly speaking, was concerned with how readers created meaning from their experience with the text. Five different perspectives within this theory had been identified: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural (Beach 1993). Given the fact that my learners needed to be helped not only to improve the nature of their reading response but also to take a more positive attitude towards the literary experience, I believed that the right theoretical perspective to adopt was the 'experiential' one since it focused on "the nature of readers' engagement or experiences with texts - the ways in which, for example, readers identify with characters, visualize images, relate personal experiences to the text, or construct the world of the text" (ibid: 8, 9).

Louise Rosenblatt, one of the foremost exponents of the experiential reader response theory, claimed that the literary experience involved both affective and intellectual aspects. A competent reader, for instance, may first react emotionally to the ideas, events, and characters in the story, and then resort to some cognitive reflection on the credibility of what was evoked or on the technical source of some emotional effect (Rosenblatt 1998: 898). As part my study I therefore designed classes that included first the evocation of feelings, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, vivid images, and background knowledge, and then a deep analysis of literary devices through inductive techniques which served to explain the learners' initial responses, enhance their interpretations of the text, and make their individual responses more solid.

Thus, the purpose of my research project was to see whether my teacher trainees could read fiction in English with greater competence and were eventually able to appreciate the literary experience more if they were trained through the use of reader-centred techniques (both affective and cognitive) characteristic of an experiential reader response theory. By literary reading competence it was meant the ability: a- to adopt an adequate reading stance (either efferent or aesthetic) according to purpose, b- to provide a reading response that was unique, and c- to make valid interpretations of the literary text (see next

section). Appreciation of the literary experience referred to the recognition of the quality and significance of reading literary texts both for pleasure and for academic purposes.

## Theoretical background

### *Nature of reader-response theory*

Unlike literary critics who believe that meaning is derived either from background information external to the text or from the text itself, reader-response theorists believe that meaning does not reside ready-made in the reader but rather is constructed from the transaction between the reader, the text, and the context. The focus is, therefore, on the readers' experience with the text in a given context. This means that the text remains merely as a set of inkspots on paper until the reader transacts with it and transforms these marks into a series of meaningful symbols (Rosenblatt 1995, 1998).

This transaction between the reader and the text is highly complex since it is made up of many elements and events that are in constant interaction. One of the first elements to consider is what the reader brings to the transaction. Rosenblatt uses the term linguistic-experiential reservoir to refer to the reader's "inner capital of funded assumptions, attitudes, and expectations about language and about the world" (1998: 891), which reflects his/her linguistic, social, cultural, and personal background. The linguistic-experiential reservoir, alongside the reader's current state during the reading transaction (present needs, interests, preoccupations, particular mood, and physical condition), highly influences the meaning that he/she constructs. All the elements that the individual reader brings to the transaction are brought together in a "never-to-be-duplicated combination" (Rosenblatt 1995: 30), which, together with the contribution made by the text, allows him/her to provide a unique response.

As soon as the reader-text transaction begins, a mental process known as "selective attention" (term coined by James 1890) starts operating. This involves selections of information from the linguistic-experiential reservoir; hypotheses formed during the reading transaction; feelings, expectations, ideas, values, and beliefs brought to the text; and the clues and many other contributions offered by the text. One of the earliest choices the reader makes concerns the psychological stance he/she adopts during the reading transaction. Broadly speaking, each stance represents the reader's predisposition to focus primarily either on the cognitive or on the

affective facets of meaning which are brought into consciousness during the reading transaction. A stance that is mainly cognitive-focused is known as efferent, whereas one that is mostly affective-based is referred to as aesthetic. Efferent and Aesthetic should be seen, in fact, not as mutually exclusive opposites but as the extreme ends of a continuum, with most reading acts falling somewhere in the middle of the continuum and exhibiting features of both stances (Rosenblatt in Smith, 2004: 144). The two terms, efferent and aesthetic, have been coined by Rosenblatt, who explains them as follows:

The term efferent (...) designates the kind of reading in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event. An extreme example is the man who has accidentally swallowed a poisonous liquid and is rapidly reading the label on the bottle to learn the antidote. (...) The man's attention is focused on learning what is to be done as soon as the reading ends (...) Reading a newspaper, textbook, or legal brief would usually provide a similar, though less extreme, instance of the predominantly efferent stance (...) Meaning results from abstracting out and analytically structuring the ideas, information, directions, or conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event. (...) The predominantly aesthetic stance covers the other half of the continuum. In this kind of reading, the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus on what is being lived through during the reading event. (...) The aesthetic reader pays attention to, savors, the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth, and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold (1994: 1066-1067).

According to Rosenblatt, a reader can approach any text either more efferently or more aesthetically, depending on his/her purpose(s) for reading the text. To illustrate how two people can read a text from two different stances, Rosenblatt relates the following anecdote:

I am reminded of the first grader whose teacher told the class to learn the following verses: In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus crossed the ocean blue. When called on the next day, the youngster recited: In fourteen hundred and ninety-three Columbus crossed the bright sea. Questioned as to why

she had changed it, she simply said she liked it better that way. (1982: 269).

Rosenblatt describes this situation as a problem of stance. Whereas the teacher intended her student to read the poem efferently to remember the date '1492', the learner had read it aesthetically, drawing on the qualitative effect of the poem and her own reading response. This anecdote serves to prove that the reader, not the text, dictates the stance to adopt.

Although reader-response theorists stress the unique nature of individuals' reading responses and, therefore, believe that alternative interpretations of literary texts are possible, most of them also think that some interpretations can be more acceptable than others. Rosenblatt borrows Dewey's idea of "warranted assertibility" to support this claim. Some shared criteria of validity of interpretation must be established to claim the superiority of some interpretations over others. The basic criteria would include:

- (1) That the context and purpose of the reading event, or the total transaction, be considered; (2) that the interpretation not be contradicted by, or not fail to cover, the full text, the signs on the page; and (3) that the interpretation not project meanings which cannot be related to signs on the page (1994: 1079).

### **Processes of Experiential Reader Response**

Based on Rosenblatt's transactional theory of response, Purves & Beach and Beach & Marshall have outlined the main processes involved in the construction of experiential reading responses: engaging, constructing, imaging, connecting, and evaluating/reflecting (Beach, 1993: 52-70). The reader experiences engagement with a literary text when he/she becomes emotionally involved with it and is able to empathise or identify with the text. The process of constructing an imagined world involves "entering into and creating alternative worlds, conceptualising characters, events, settings" (ibid: 52). Imaging refers to the creation of visual images and helps to make the literary experience more vivid. The process known as connecting involves relating one's past experiences (Rosenblatt's linguistic-experiential reservoir) to the text. Finally, evaluating/reflecting is concerned with "judging the quality of one's experience with a text" (ibid: 52). Readers assess, for instance, if the experiences in the text are treated with the degree of sensitivity they expect or if they simply satisfy their particular expectations (ibid: 65-66).

Classroom techniques widely used to stimulate these processes include journal writing, oral think-alouds, group discussions, and re-writing stories from the perspective of a specific character.

## Research methodology

### Sample

The study involved 11 EFL teacher trainees from a teacher training college in Argentina. These were all native speakers of Spanish, Argentinian natives, females, middle-class, and aged between 20 and 29. Their language proficiency was advanced in the four macro-skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). They were all doing the 3rd year of a 4-year English teacher training course. Their initial expectations for my class, English Language III, included: 'to improve writing skills' (100% of them), 'to improve oral skills' (36%), 'to improve their general level of English' (18%), 'to improve reading skills' (9%), 'to enhance knowledge of English Grammar' (9%), and 'to avoid making mistakes' (9%). Their previous academic studies involved secondary education and two years in the current teacher training course.

The first questionnaire the informants completed revealed the following information about their reading experience. First, there was no homogeneity in the participants' reading habits. Overall, three distinct groups of literary readers could be identified: apathetic literary readers (5 trainees), average literary readers (3 trainees), and avid literary readers (3 trainees). Second, most participants read a considerable number of hours per week (more than 11 hours), which meant that reading represented a significant aspect of their lives and a useful skill to master. Third, except for one trainee, the rest claimed to have read fiction for pleasure for at least 4-5 years. Fourth, most of the sources they read for pleasure, without considering novels and short stories, were non-fictional texts such as magazines, newspapers, and reference books. Fifth, all of them read in both Spanish and English. Finally, the average level of difficulty in reading English texts was 2.5/5.0, all scores ranging between 2 and 3 and the amount of unknown vocabulary being the most popular factor contributing to making reading in English difficult.

### Design of Research

The study could be regarded as quasi-experimental research. The group participating was not formed specifically for the purpose of the experiment but was 'natural' since it existed prior to the research. No control groups were used;

instead, research was conducted with only one group under conditions similar to those found in real educational contexts. The project involved some treatment or intervention (X) and some observation or measurement (O). Different combinations of treatment and observation are possible depending on the objectives of the design. The combination used in this study was O1 X O2, which means First Observation (Pre-intervention period) + Treatment (Intervention period) + Second Observation (Post-intervention period).

### Data Collection and Analysis

**Pre-Intervention Period (three 45-minute lessons)**  
Three different methods were employed. First, a questionnaire (questionnaire 1) was used to collect data about the participants (personal information, reading experience, and appreciation of the literary experience). It elicited both qualitative and quantitative information through both open and closed questions. The personal information collected was used to write a description of the teacher trainees. The data generated through open questions were analysed qualitatively whereas those generated through closed questions were analysed quantitatively. Second, a stream-of-consciousness writing task was used to probe more deeply into the participants' views on the literary reading experience. The data collected were analysed qualitatively. The information gathered through this task and the questionnaire was used to establish the 'baseline' about the teachers' appreciation of the literary experience. Third, the trainees wrote a report on a short story (written report 1), including all the information they thought was worth discussing. The purpose was to assess their literary reading competence (see assessment criteria in Appendix A). The data obtained were analysed qualitatively.

### Intervention Period (twelve 45-minute lessons):

Two methods were employed. First, reading logs (adapted from the guidelines proposed by Carlisle 2000) were used to make the pre-service teachers focus on their experience while reading a story. The ultimate objective was to find out about their literary reading response, i.e. about the five aforesaid experiential reading processes, the uniqueness of their interpretations, and the validity of their interpretations. Second, teacher diaries were used to provide information about the subjects' feelings and opinions about their experience in class. The data collected helped me to determine what classroom conditions, materials, and tasks facilitated the teachers' development of

literary reading responses. The data gathered through these two instruments were analysed qualitatively and served a twofold purpose: a- to carry out formative assessment during the intervention period and, thus, to make any necessary changes which might lead to success, and b- to observe the participants' construction and development of experiential reading responses.

#### **Post-Intervention Period (three 45-minute lessons)**

Three methods were employed. First, the trainees wrote a second report on another short story (written report 2), including all the information they thought was worth discussing. The purpose was to assess their literary reading competence after the intervention, to compare it with the baseline established before the intervention, and to see if the intervention period had had an effect on their level of literary reading proficiency (see assessment criteria in Appendix A). The data were analysed qualitatively. Second, a questionnaire (questionnaire 2) was used to gather information about the trainees' appreciation of the literary experience after the intervention period. The results were compared with some of the results obtained in questionnaire 1 in order to see if the participants' appreciation of the literary experience had improved. The information collected through open-ended questions was analysed qualitatively whereas that gathered through closed-ended questions were analysed quantitatively. Finally, a semi-structured interview was carried out to find out information about the teachers' reading response to the short story reported in written report 2, about their experience during the project, and about their current perception of the literary reading experience. Data were analysed qualitatively.

Two raters were involved in the analysis of the trainees' qualitative data. My analysis was compared with that of my fellow rater, and only those aspects that had been found relevant by both of us were considered in the description of findings.

#### **Teaching Materials**

Six short stories were used in the entire project (1 in the pre-observation period, 4 in the intervention stage, and 1 in the post-intervention phase). These were selected applying the following criteria: themes and issues which were of interest and familiar to the learners; a level of complexity which was challenging but not impossible to manage, measured according to the density of lexical items, language forms and uses, socio-

cultural contents, and literary devices; a variety of discourse types such as conversations, descriptions, and narratives; a variety of literary devices which were included in the course syllabus; and the potential of these short stories to help the pre-service teachers go through the five processes involved in the construction of literary responses. In addition, reading guides were designed containing tasks which the participants did after they had completed their reading logs and discussed their contents in groups. They provided instruction in and practice of three literary contents included in the course syllabus: stereotypes, characterisation, and point of view.

#### **Research discussions and findings**

The discussion of the meaning of the research findings is divided into the two foci of this study: Appreciation of the Literary Experience and Literary Reading Competence.

##### **A. Appreciation of the literary experience**

Overall, the intervention had a positive effect on the teachers' appreciation of the literary experience. What follows are the conclusions drawn in relation to each of the five aspects connected with this focus. Pseudonyms have been used.

##### **A.1 How important is reading fiction in their lives?**

The comparison between questionnaires 1 and 2 revealed that the intervention had produced four positive outcomes. First, two teacher trainees (Sonia and Claudia) had a more positive opinion of the importance of reading fiction in their lives. Sonia appeared to have experienced a significant change since before the intervention she considered reading fiction as not very important in her life and after the treatment she regarded it as very important. Claudia changed her opinion from important to very important. Second, seven participants still held a positive view of the importance of reading fiction in their lives. These nine teacher trainees were exactly the same students who, in the final interview, claimed that literary reading was valuable for them.

Two learners (Martha and Stella) stated that reading fiction was not very important in their lives. These students had been regarded, before the intervention, as apathetic literary readers in view of the fact that, although they claimed to read extensively per week (16-20 hours), very little of this reading included literary sources. Yet, in the final interview, their answers revealed a fairly positive attitude towards literary reading:

**Martha:** "Little by little, I'm getting more interested in literary reading. I think that in this course we are reading more for pleasure and feelings than for content; I like this aspect"

**Stella:** "I don't know if literary reading is good for me. I suppose it is. It probably helps me have a different view of things"

### ***A.2 How relevant is it for them to read fiction in my class?***

The comparison between questionnaires 1 and 2 indicated that the intervention had produced two positive outcomes. First, eight trainees still held a positive view of the relevance of reading fiction in my class. Second, three trainees (Sonia, Martha, and Anna) had a more positive opinion of the relevance of reading fiction in this class. When asked if they would change anything in particular about this class during the interview, all of them stated that they would not change anything. This might lead us to assume that they thought it was appropriate to include literary reading in my class since all the intervention was based on literary work.

### ***A.3 How useful is it for them to read fiction in my class? Why?***

The comparison between questionnaires 1 and 2 suggested that the intervention had produced four positive outcomes. First, four trainees (Sonia, Martha, Anna, and Claire) had a more positive opinion of the usefulness of reading fiction in my class. Second, six student teachers still held a positive view of the usefulness of reading fiction in this class. Third, the informants had more arguments now than before the intervention to claim that reading fiction was useful in this class. Fourth, they seemed to appreciate the importance of some of the principles of reader-response theories.

Further evidence of these learners' positive opinion could be found during the interview. They were all able to mention what they had learned through work on literary texts, which might suggest that they found reading fiction in this class useful. The following answers were provided by the four trainees who had now a more positive opinion of the usefulness of reading fiction in my class:

**Sonia:** "I learned how my point of view, analysis and even feelings towards a story can change listening to my classmates' points of view, analysis and feelings, agreeing and disagreeing with them, especially with the class discussion. I think this is valuable because it opens my mind to other perspectives and makes me realise all the things I miss when I read a story for the first time or without sharing with nobody"

**Martha:** "I think that now I have learned a technique to have access to my thoughts in order to write about different sensations towards a text"

**Anna:** "Yes. I actually started to pay more attention to the construction of characters and how to be able to recreate that. I also learned to include my emotions in the analysis of the text, although I still have difficulties with. I think this latter is important to learn, because in order to read correctly you need this emotional connection (...) Unfortunately, given I normally have too much to read for University, I do not have so much chances to do literary reading. But this class gives me the opportunity to do so"

**Claire:** "(...) I think I've learnt to enjoy reading and to allow myself to feel and imagine whatever came to my mind. Some time ago, I used to read and place myself outside the story independently of the way the story was being told, I refused to become emotionally involved or I thought so".

Although it was true that the learners had expressed more arguments after the intervention and that they had included many reasons related to the principles of reader-response theories, it cannot be denied that five of the six most popular arguments appeared to have little to do with the pleasure of reading fiction (to learn new vocabulary, to learn grammatical structures, to develop their critical reading skills, to improve their writing skills, and to learn the author's writing techniques). This may indicate that they still kept in mind some instrumental motivation for reading fiction in this class.

### ***A.4 How motivating do they find reading fiction in English? Why?***

The comparison between questionnaires 1 and 2 showed that the intervention had produced four positive outcomes. First, four teacher trainees (Sonia, Martha, Claire, and Maggie) had a more positive opinion of how motivating they found reading fiction. Second, five students still held a very positive view of how motivating they found reading fiction, their scores being 4 or 5 out of 5. Third, the teachers had more arguments to explain why they found reading fiction in English motivating. Fourth, they seemed to appreciate the importance of some of the principles of reader-response theories. Once more, however, three of the five most popular arguments appeared to bear little relevance to the pleasure of reading fiction (the possibility to learn and practise the English language, the exploration of interesting contents, and the possibility to improve their reading skills). This is further evidence of their instrumental motivation for reading fiction in English.

### A.5 Why do people read fiction?

The comparison between questionnaires 1 and 2 indicated that the treatment had produced two positive outcomes. First, the trainees had more arguments to explain why people read fiction. Second, they seemed to appreciate the importance of some of the principles of reader-response theories. Worth highlighting is the fact that none of the reasons provided by the informants could be regarded as instrumental motivation but rather had to do with the pleasure of reading fiction *per se*. Although one cannot assure that these arguments referred to their own reasons for reading fiction, it is positive that they were aware of them.

All in all, six different students seemed to have developed a better appreciation of the literary experience and four trainees to have held their positive opinions. Two of the pre-service teachers experienced both positive and negative effects on their appreciation of the literary experience: Martha, whose scores were higher in 3 aspects but lower in 1, and Claudia, whose scores were higher in 1 aspect but lower in another aspect. Yet, of all these students, the most salient cases were those of Sonia, who experienced a positive effect in 4 aspects, and Stella, who experienced only some negative effect and her scores after the intervention were lower in 2 aspects.

In the case of Sonia, she had been regarded, before the intervention, as an apathetic literary reader since, although she said she read extensively per week (16-20 hours), she claimed not to read any novels or short stories for pleasure and stated that reading fiction was not very important in her life. Yet, in questionnaire 1 and unlike her answers to questionnaire 2, she assigned the maximum score in 3 aspects and the second best in the other aspect. Her journal entries were further evidence of her progress towards a greater appreciation of the literary experience. In the first class, she confessed she felt a little bit scared and thought the classes were going to be challenging to her. Then, in the entry for the third class, she wrote:

**Sonia:** "(...) I feel more relieved than the first one (class). I found very interesting the activities we performed today. I think is going to be challenging for me because I'm not the kind of person that shows her feelings very often and expressing them in English would be far more difficult than it is in Spanish (...)"

According to this extract, she appeared to feel a bit motivated but found some aspects involved in a reader-response approach fairly challenging (sharing and expressing her feelings). She also mentioned the disadvantage of dealing with a

foreign language. For the following class she wrote:

**Sonia:** "I enjoyed the class very much. I liked to exchange ideas and points of view with my partners and teacher because it made me realize many things I wasn't able the first time I read the story. I'm not scared any more though I still found very difficult to participate (...)"

This entry shows her progress in relation to collaborative work, though she was still experiencing some difficulties. Finally, in the entry to the last class she stated:

**Sonia:** "I'm very motivated because I feel that what I see in the classes I can put it in practice on my responses and, especially, when facing a new short story or text. (...) I feel very motivated about the feedback on my responses. Though I'm aware that I have many problems as regards writing I feel enthusiastic about keep learning and improving"

In this entry, Sonia did not mention any problems in relation to working collaboratively and focused on how motivated she felt. It could be concluded that the activities and classroom conditions proposed by a reader-response approach had facilitated Sonia's better appreciation of the literary experience.

Like Sonia, Stella had been placed among apathetic literary readers. However, unlike Sonia, Stella appeared to have experienced only negative effects. She still claimed that reading fiction was not important in her life, and her scores were lower in two aspects: the usefulness of reading fiction in my class and how motivating she found reading fiction in English. Her journal entries revealed information that might explain her apathy towards literary reading and her lack of progress in this project. After the first class of the intervention, she wrote:

**Stella:** "(...) For the last 20 years I've just read efferently, for school, analysing the plot, the characters and the time and setting. I never 'interacted' with the text, the reader-based approach is new for me, and when I heard about it today, I felt that I had wasted a lot of time reading under pressure and not for pleasure. From now on I'll try to read aesthetically, even if what I read was assigned by a teacher at university (...)"

This extract reveals a problem which many students experience during their primary and secondary school education: the sole emphasis of teaching practices on efferent reading and the subsequent failure of the education system to help learners to develop an appreciation of literary reading. Twenty-nine-year-old Stella had spent most of her life adopting a predominantly efferent stance, a reading habit which could not be



changed overnight. It was not surprising, therefore, that a four-week intervention period could not reverse her original and fossilised reading practices. However, many of her comments in her journal and in the interview might reveal that the situation could be reversed with more extensive work on aesthetic reading. First, she claimed to have enjoyed all the tasks involved in a reader-based methodology (group discussions sharing feelings and points of view, writing comments in reading logs, rewriting a story from a different point of view, and keeping a journal). She was the only student who asked me, after the intervention, if she could continue writing her journal and if I could read it from time to time. Second, she acknowledged what she had learned during this project in both her journal entries and the interview. Finally, her reading logs and written responses showed her progress towards a more reader-based approach to the text and towards the adoption of a mainly aesthetic stance when reading fiction.

The last aspect that is worth noting with respect to the learners' appreciation of the literary experience is the fact that, according to their answers during the interview, seven of them were not planning to do any literary reading in the near future. Even though they claimed to have time constraints, their unwillingness to read fiction in their free time might reveal that they still did not associate literary reading with pleasure. Nevertheless, considering the short period of time which the intervention involved, it could be concluded that the overall effect of the use of reader-centred techniques characteristic of an experiential reader response theory on the trainees' appreciation of the literary experience had been essentially positive.

### **B. Literary Reading Competence**

The progress shown by the student teachers vis-à-vis their literary reading competence could be easily appreciated in the findings obtained in the two written reports. The reading logs offered further evidence of this improvement.

The written reports provide probably the most compelling indication that the reader-response approach adopted had had a highly positive effect on the learners' literary reading competence. First, their approach to the literary text after the intervention was mainly reader-based, as opposed to the primarily text-based approach favoured in the pre-intervention period. Second, unlike their predominantly efferent stance adopted before the intervention, their psychological stance was now primarily aesthetic. Third, whereas their first

written report was fairly predictable and impersonal, their second report was no doubt unique and appealing. In written report # 1, there was hardly any evidence of the five reading processes involved in the construction of reading responses (see Appendix B). The second report, on the other hand, included evidence of all or most of the five reading processes under consideration: emotional involvement, construction of an imagined world, connection with the linguistic-experiential reservoir, creation of visual images, and evaluation of the quality of the experience with the text (see Appendix C). Finally, the valid interpretations included in the participants' second report substantially outnumbered those in the first report (see Appendices B and C). As regards reading logs, they provide further proof of the trainees' development towards more reliable and unique reading responses (see Appendix D). In conclusion, the effect of the use of reader-centred techniques characteristic of an experiential reader response theory on the informants' literary reading competence had been positive and fully proven.

### **Implications**

There are two major limitations which restrict the implications of this study. First, the small number of participants and their marked similarity with respect to their socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds reduce the possibility to produce valid generalisations. Second, the short intervention period did not permit the observation and assessment of further effects such as the transference of the reading skills acquired to the reading of other fictional text types (e.g. novels and poems) and the long-term development of literary reading habits.

Despite these limitations, the study carries important implications for the teaching of literary texts in EFL contexts. Like in L1 contexts, the adoption of a classroom approach based on experiential reader-response theories has proved to be successful at developing the learners' appreciation of the literary experience and literary reading competence. The students can be helped to value the importance of reading fiction in their lives and to construct more unique and solid reading responses. In addition, they can learn to adopt a psychological stance that is in accordance with their particular purpose for reading. Finally, they are trained to make valid interpretations of literary texts, which leads to a more critical reading experience. All this, in turn, can highly influence the formation of literary reading habits, which

might contribute to the fight against a larger problem, that of aliteracy (lack of reading habit).

## Conclusion

Louise Rosenblatt once said that “literature is an ‘endangered species’” (1982: 277). My experience as a primary, secondary, and college student and teacher has proved the validity of this statement. The demands of the ever-changing globalised world we live in require that our students develop good reasoning and analytical skills and that they act out always in response to the norms imposed from without. Accordingly, current teaching practices appear to spoon-feed students to enable them to satisfy their immediate needs, while wilfully neglecting the unique, the aesthetic, the creative, and whatever comes from within the learners.

In this adverse context, expecting our students to develop the habit of aesthetic evocation and personal response seems to be utopian. It looks as if teachers supporting a reader-response methodology were fighting a losing battle. This may be true. But nothing entirely indicates that this battle is not worth fighting. I insist that our learners should be helped to move beyond a simple interpretation of books and to stop looking for the meaning of a text as if it were a treasure hidden inside the text itself or as if it depended solely on the full understanding of the socio-cultural context in which the text was produced. Instead, we should enable them to discover the meaning of texts within themselves. I also believe that students should seek in literary texts the answers to their own questions, and not to those imposed by their teachers. Finally, I think that they should be helped to understand that no critical appreciation of a fictional text is good enough if the reader has not been emotionally engaged, has not constructed his/her own imagined world, has not created relevant visual images, has not experienced some connection with his/her linguistic-experiential reservoir, or has not evaluated the quality of his/her experience with the text.

If we are successful, we will have empowered students to live in books and, thus, to reach a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. This understanding will, in turn, enable them to develop emotional intelligence, empathy, and multicultural competence. Ultimately, they will feel better prepared for the demands of this ever-changing globalised world.

## References

- Allwright, D. & Bailey, K.** 1991. *Focus on the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Amer, A. A.** 2003. ‘Teaching EFL/ESL Literature’. *The Reading Matrix* 3/2: 64-71.
- Beach, R.** 1993. *A Teacher’s Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*. U.S.A.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Carlisle, A.** 2000. Reading logs: an application of reader-response theory in ELT. *ELT Journal* 54/1: 12-19.
- Elliot, R.** 1990. Encouraging reader-response to literature in ESL situations. *ELT Journal* 44/3: 191-198.
- Eagleton, T.** 1983. *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Hirvela, A.** 1996. Reader-response theory and ELT. *ELT Journal* 50/2: 127-134.
- James, W.** 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover
- Murphy, S.** 1998. Remembering that reading is ‘a way of happening’. *Clearing House* 72/2: 89-96.
- Oster, J.** 1989. ‘Seeing with different eyes: another view of literature in the ESL class’. *TESOL Quarterly* 23: 85-103.
- Purves, A.** 1988. The Aesthetic Mind of Louise Rosenblatt. *Reader* 20: 68-77.  
Available:  
<http://www.hu.mtu.edu/reader/online/20/purves20.html>  
(Retrieved 22nd April 2010).
- Rosenblatt, L.** 1982. The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response. *Theory into Practice* 21/4: 268-277.
- Rosenblatt, L.** 1994. ‘The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing’. In Ruddell et al. *Theoretical Models & Processes of Reading*. Newark, N.J.: IRA.
- Rosenblatt, L.** 1995. *Literature as Exploration*. (5th ed.). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Rosenblatt, L.** 1998. Readers, Texts, Authors. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 34/4: 886-921.
- Seliger, H.. & Shohamy, E.** 1989. *Second Language Research Methods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, D.** 2004. The poet, the child and the blackbird: aesthetic reading and spiritual development. *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 9/2: 143-154.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Assessment Criteria

The following aspects were analysed in trainees' written reports 1 and 2:

1. Learner's overall approach to the text: **author-based**, **text-based**, and **reader-based**
2. Learner's psychological stance: **predominantly efferent** or **predominantly aesthetic**
3. The extent to which the learner's response is **unique**. Thus, reference is made to the main processes involved in the construction of reading responses:
  - **engagement** with the text (whether the learner is emotionally involved, so he/she experiences love, anger, shame, pity, etc.)
  - the learner's **construction of an imagined world** (whether the learner enters into and creates alternative worlds, conceptualises characters, events, settings; whether he/she reconstructs text by extending story, imagining characters' thoughts, and reviewing ending; whether the new perceptions gained shape the way he/she perceives his/her own real world or whether he/she attempts to impose his/her own existing perspectives, attitudes and beliefs onto texts; whether he/she empathises or feels identified with the perspectives of the narrator(s) and/or characters)
  - the learner's **creation of visual images** about characters, settings, and situations
  - the learner's connection with his/her **linguistic-experiential reservoir** (his/her linguistic, social, cultural, and personal background)
  - the learner's **evaluation** of the quality of his/her experience with the text (whether his/her experience with the text satisfied his/her expectations; whether situations and characters in the text are treated satisfactorily according to his/her expectations)
4. The **validity of their interpretation**. Basic criteria: (1) the interpretation is not contradicted by, or does not fail to cover, the full text; and (2) the interpretation can be related to the text. Other criteria: responses will be attributed more or less validity based on the complexity of the affective and intellectual factors they include

### Appendix B: Samples taken from written report 1

#### Part A

The teacher trainees' approach to the literary text was, in all the cases, mainly text-based. They did an analysis of different aspects of the text such as the title, plot, characters, setting, themes, tone, symbols, discourse devices (descriptions), structure of the text, and use of vocabulary.

**Stella:** "One of the aspects that first call my attention whenever I read is the **title**, and in this case, *Chapter 1* was no exception. I tried to predict the content of the story by reading the title and looking at the pictures but I could not (...) As I went on reading, I tried to see if the title was mentioned, or if the story had something to do with the chapters (...) The **use of vocabulary** also called my attention. In the introduction the author uses a lot of adjectives and description, which –in my opinion– are meant to help the reader make a picture in his mind of the **setting** of the story (...) The **tone** of the story was rather melancholic, mainly because of what Natanii had to go through (...)"

#### Part B

Many students devoted most of their responses simply to retelling the story.

**Claudia:** "Natanii was a seven-year-old boy who lived with his mother and grandfather between the red walls of Canyon de Chelly. They lived hidden since they were tired of running from soldiers who wanted to destroy their sources of food and force them into submission by starvation. Natanii's father had died trying to protect his family and community from one of their attacks (...) One day, his grandfather asked him to gather wood for the fire. When he returned to the camp he heard children crying and he saw people running and shouting. The soldiers were attacking his camp. At that moment, Natanii only thought of his grandfather. After a while he found him dead but he couldn't do anything so he ran for cover (...)"

#### Part C

The learners paid attention mostly to the quantitative and factual aspects of meaning (efferent reading) than to the qualitative and emotive facets of meaning (aesthetic reading). They seemed to adopt a distant posture when describing the contents of the story. The extract in **Part A** might serve to illustrate the predominately efferent stance the learners adopted.

**Martha:** "In chapter 1, we observe, through the eyes of a seven-year-old indian, how the indian tribes were being killed and deprived of their territories by the white and civilized citizens of the United States during the 1860's. In

this chapter, Natanii described how the life of 'his people' was being destroyed by several years of warfare against 'his people'. This policy, which the Indians criticized, destroyed the Indians' sources of food, forcing them into submission by starvation. Moreover, the constant white people attacks were destroying Indian settlements and lives. In this particular attack which Natanii described, we get to know that almost all Indians were killed. This chapter exemplifies the hatred that existed between whites and Indians in the United States in those times (...)"

**Rose:** "In my opinion what is worth discussing about this story are family values. The way Indians relate to one another inside their families and the hierarchy that is established is very interesting"

#### Part D

Only two students made reference to creating visual images while reading the story.

**Stella:** "In the introduction the author uses a lot of adjectives and description, which –in my opinion– are meant to help the reader make a picture in his mind of the setting of the story. If this was the author's intention, she succeeded (at least with me), because I placed myself in that time and place, and I could almost feel part of the scene"

**Sonia:** "The author provides rich descriptions which made me create, in my mind, a vivid picture of the way this aborigine society lives"

There was only one response with some evidence of an evaluation of the quality of the learner's experience with the text.

**Stella:** "I really liked the way the writer refers to destruction, how fire and soldiers on horses cleared the land, in the first case for cornfields, while in the second one from people, just for the sake of destruction"

#### Part E

There were four responses with one simple interpretation each. Three of these interpretations are valid, whereas the other one is a misinterpretation of one part of the story.

**Pamela:** "This story also emphasizes the strong meaning of the 'crops' which were not only the cure for the Indians' starvation, but also Natanii's protection against death" (valid interpretation)

**Anna:** "the author provides various hints as how this society works: The ones in charge of authority and transmitting culture in the family are the men, in this case Natanii's grandfather, given his father has died; the Yeis, the older ones in the group, are in charge of laws and rules; and the Navajo's respect to Nature, its religion being based on it" (valid interpretation)

**Maggie:** "He (Natanii) realizes that these white men do not play a game, they use real guns. We can see through this reasoning how Natanii has grown too old for his age" (valid interpretation)

**Nancy:** "they were never safer because the man who ruled them did not follow an effective method of warfare" (wrong interpretation)

#### Appendix C: Samples taken from written report 2

The following samples reveal the learners' mainly reader-based approach to the text, the predominantly aesthetic stance adopted, the unique nature of their responses, and their valid interpretations. In the interest of organisation, the samples have been grouped under the following headings: emotional engagement, creation of visual images, construction of an imagined world, connection with linguistic-experiential reservoir, evaluation of the experience with the text, and valid interpretations.

##### Emotional Engagement

**Claudia:** "Those images made me feel pity for him, and anger towards Roberto, his employer, who exploited him."

**Laura:** "As I read the story, a deep sense of pity and powerlessness got into me as I put myself into Manuel's shoes, feeling his frustration and disappointment towards life. (...) As I was reading the end of the short story I felt a great sense of joy spreading inside of me as I could feel Manuel was finally defending his own rights, his money but especially his pride and self respect."

##### Creation of Visual Images

**Stella:** "In all these cases the author makes use of similes to emphasize what he is saying and to create an image in our mind. I could clearly see Manuel trapped among the apricot trees, and I thought that at least once in our lives we feel the same way. (...) The use of adjectives makes the text very vivid. As a reader I could picture the characters, the setting and most important, the description of dawn, which is really rich. (...) I could also picture him (Roberto Morales) fat and greedy, wearing his Mexican hat, hiding his face so as not to see other people in the eye, lying..."

**Maggie:** " (...) I was able to picture Manuel's reaction in my mind; I was even capable of watching him throwing his bucket of fruits and feeling that sense of power never experienced before. (...) "

### Construction of an Imagined World

**Rose:** "I absolutely identify myself with Manuel in every single line of the text, I mean, I was able to feel the way he felt throughout the whole story: I sweat when he did, I felt my arms tired when he did, I could smell and admire the landscape when he did, and so on."

**Claudia:** "The inclusion of Spanish words was a really original feature. In my case, those words made the story more meaningful because they made me feel as I were Manuel sometimes; I could be in his shoes. In this way, I could experience his feelings of suffering and how his relationship with his partners and boss was. I think that this technique is a distinctive feature of this story; I forgot for some time that I was reading fiction."

### Connection with Experiential-Linguistic Reservoir

**Rose:** "I have witnessed people from different nationalities sleeping in public parks, waiting for their 'employers' to take them to their 'jobs'. I have seen them sailing in a type of canoe which costs four times a flight ticket does, and dying at sea when trying to get to the so called developed countries' shores. I have seen and heard about innumerable and terrible things. Yet, the most frightening fact is that human humiliation has become so common that it is unperceived by the world's eyes. I cannot help wondering myself where the civilized western world is. Does it exist?"

**Martha:** "(...) All these aspects of Manuel's life remind me of Bolivians working in the brick industries of Balcarce, and of people in the North of our country working hard all day in the cotton fields."

### Evaluation of the Experience with the Text

**Rose:** "Personally, it is my belief that immigrants' misfortunes are accurately portrayed in the story. However, I do not agree with its end, since in my opinion it is unreal. These people have to make silence in front of most of unfair situations, not only because could they lose their job but also because could they be deported to their country, and therefore, forget about their illusions forever. Nevertheless, I interpret that the author may have wanted the reader to get what is not possible in real life, as a kind of compensation for living in such an unfair world."

**Martha:** "Finally, I was proud of Manuel because I expected him to react and he did so. This is why I liked the ending of the story. Besides, I enjoyed very much the idea of Manuel's partners supporting him, and letting Morales know that they were all discontented with the fact that they had to work and live in appalling conditions for such a miserable pay."

### Valid Interpretations

**Sonia:** "(...) what specially caught my attention while reading the text was the duality underlying in the concept of light. Light means for Manuel a hint of hope, but also, the beginning of another exhausting day of work. This is when I include the relation with the title. Dawn is related to the first rays of daylight which comforted Manuel, which gave him hope, but at the same time, it meant sacrifice, work and pain (emotional and physical) But above all this, dawn is connected to the ending of the story, a new beginning, a rebirth, another day which might bring better things to Manuel as a result of his reaction towards Morales. (...) I pretty much enjoyed the way in which Manuel described his job, modern slavery, "silvery slavery." I figured that he referred to it as "silvery" because of the coins he got for each full bucket."

**Nancy:** "In my opinion, the *contratista's* surname, Morales, seems quite paradoxical because he did not know what was 'morally' good and correct. I feel that he had no principles or values as he never showed generosity towards his workers. Although Morales called them 'amigos', he was a bully, manipulator of migrating farm workers, a clever criminal who was giving orders all the time. (...) When he (Manuel) compared himself with the honey-gathering ant, what I felt was his desire to own a house as the ant, and live with his family in it."

### Appendix D: Samples from reading logs

#### A. Processes involved in the construction of reading responses

### A.1. Construction of an imagined world

a- Empathising with the perspectives or situation of characters

**Anna:** "He (Ernest) is very depressed and it's depressing me"

b- Attempting to impose their own existing perspectives

**Stella:** "If I were Martha, I would tell everyone to do things themselves (...) Why didn't Martha ask for a divorce? I would have done so immediately. Didn't she realise what life as a wife would be like before she got married? Innocent Martha"

c- Imagining the characters' thoughts

**Claire:** "... it seems as though she (Mamacita) felt that by not learning English she will never belong there, she will not abandon her identity"

d- Reconstructing the text by extending the story

**Claudia:** "We can imagine that he never picked up the children from school or anything. He didn't do anything for his children or wife"

### A.2. Emotional engagement with the text

**Claire:** "I feel sad for her because I think she doesn't like the way her husband deals with things or problems in general"

**Martha:** "I'm getting mad at Martha! I think she should send the towels to the cleaners"

### A.3. Connection with the linguistic-experiential reservoir

**Laura:** "Martha's life makes me remember my grandmother. She lives in Boston, U.S. with my aunt, uncle and cousin. Once I travelled there, I was shocked for the way they treated her. She's like a servant; she cooks, cleans, everything!!"

### A.4. Creation of visual images

**Nancy:** "I imagine Ernest as a serious man, but not a bad one. Maybe he seems very cold because of what he had to pass throughout his life. I imagine the café very lightly, crowded, and full of cakes and a variety of food"

### A.5. Evaluation of the quality of the experience with the text

**Nancy:** "This text doesn't satisfy my expectations because I thought that Martha was going to react, and say stop!! I'm not a servant!! Apart from that, I thought that Martha was going to defend her friend Janet, that she was going to argue with Katie"

## B. Valid interpretations

### B.1. About the author's writing techniques

**Sonia:** "The author's way of narrating is very peculiar. Short sentences and paragraphs, repeated words makes the impression that everything is happening very fast. In the case of Martha, I feel that she has no spare time at all. It exhausted me!"

### B.2. About the contents of the story

**Anna:** "When she shout at Larry to stop crying I think she is trying to avoid that he grows up to be a coward like his father. Morton is trying to get the rage out of his chest by trying to beat Larry"